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AUTHOR McEwan, Anna E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that collaborative learning is possible within graduate education and examines the process whereby a classroom can develop into a unified learning community of shared experiences. Using excerpts of student writings and dialogue, three aspects surrounding the creation of a learning community are explored: (1) the risk of trust, (2) the art of transparency, and (3) the passion for learning. The risk of trust is examined in the context of student teacher/peer relationships in which the teacher communicates warmth and trust to the student, and the students receive strength from the teacher and each other. The art of transparency in the classroom relates to students feeling positive about having their doubts, ideas, opinions, and questions scrutinized by others. Finally, the passion for learning encompasses the classroom's willingness to engage in critical classroom discussions. Contains 15 references. (GLR)

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ON BECOMING A SOJOURNING COMMUNITY

Anna E. McEwan
Florida State University
Educational Theory and Practice
115 Stone Building, B-199
Tallahassee, FL 32312

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ON BECOMING A SOJOURNING COMMUNITY

Much has been written in recent months about the importance of developing a "community" within the classroom. A sense of community is praised for facilitating learning and providing a moral classroom climate (Barth, 1990; Brandt, 1992; Crossman & Behrens, 1992; Hansen, 1991; Hughes, 1989; Lickona, 1991; Noddings, 1992). In light of such ideas and considering that they often grow out of university research studies, one wonders why graduate schools of education have been slow to "practice what is being preached", and the question is raised: Can collaborative communities of learners exist in the world of higher education?

I believe they can and do because I was fortunate to have been involved with such a group at Florida State University from the fall of 1991 to the present. In the summer of 1992 our graduate seminar was entitled, "Narrative in Research and Pedagogy". Eight people, one male and seven females, comprised the group. We ranged in age from 29 to 61. Our backgrounds were as diverse as our ages, with a former business executive, several classroom teachers, a professional skier, and school administrators making up the group. From a variety of walks of life we converged toward one path. We shared a common goal--to explore the use of narrative in education. We soon discovered, however, that our goal was broader and more universal than we had

originally thought.

What began as eight individuals journeying down a path toward narrative soon became a sojourning community, unafraid to travel together through a beckoning wilderness. Although I am not sure exactly when the fusion occurred, I know that at some point our individual "parts" became a symbiotic "whole".

The Hellenistic Greeks used the word "koinonia" to develop the idea of "fellowship" or "partnership". In its richest sense, the word denotes something shared in common with others: common language, common ownership, common relationships, or common ideas. Of the many forms of the word common, the concept of community is easily the most dynamic (Thompson, 1977). From the early Greek lyceums, to Emerson's "circle of friends", to my recent graduate seminar, education has always possessed special communities of learners for whom shared experience has held profound meaning.

As much for myself as for the benefit of others, I now ask "why"? What causes people to enter into "koinonia"? What elements unite to create a sojourning community? For me, three aspects of our shared experience provide answers to these questions: the risk of trust; the art of transparency, and the passion for learning.

Interpretive Framework

I have viewed this educational episode from a non-traditional, "moderate hermeneutic" perspective (Gallagher, 1992). Traditional hermeneutics would examine our learning experience in terms of reading and interpreting texts, implying

that to study the process of textual interpretation is to study the process of learning. While learning can take place in uncovering the meaning of written and spoken communications, moderate hermeneutics proposes that learning also involves complex interchanges of interpretation found in the educational experience itself. Moderate hermeneutics investigates the process, as opposed to the end-product, of interpretation. Because learning always involves interpretation, the use of moderate hermeneutics offers the promise of a deeper understanding of our seminar experience, and much to my surprise, a deeper understanding of myself.

Self-understanding in relation to others is inherent in the moderate hermeneutic process of interpretation. Our shared experience involved an ever-transforming understanding of myself that grew out of my encounters with "the unfamiliar, formal subject matter and fellow students" (Gallagher, 1992, p. 190). My interpretations were tested out, challenged, and constrained in this process. The stark recognition of such constraints became clear when at four different stages of development this paper was read and critiqued by my fellow seminar participants. At one stage, reflecting upon the creation of our community of learners, I cited "the pursuit of truth" as a contributing element. I wrote:

> I believe the search for truth is always elusive. At times, we are near it, yet as we extend our arms and stretch our fingers we cannot seem to touch it. Sometimes we hear strains of truth, yet when asked to recall the tune we cannot remember the full harmony. At other times, we catch glimpses of truth, yet our perspectives are colored by a variety of conceptual lenses.

Because this conceptualization did not resonate with all the group members, I felt it was my responsibility to reconsider my perceptions of our shared experience. Another paper could be written to address the struggles I faced in the telling and retelling of my story. Suffice it to say the dialogical character of interpretation held my subjectivity in check, and my individual "pursuit of truth" became the group's "passion for learning". Throughout this paper I will use excerpts from the writings of and dialogue among my fellow group members as a way to interweave my story within the nature of our collectively lived experience.

****THE RISK OF TRUST****

To write a story and share it with others is to take a risk, for when our stories are read by others we are forced to relinquish "control over the context and interpretation" of our word Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). One aspect of our seminar involved sharing narratives. The following excerpt written by the elder member of our group, helped reassure all of us that we too, could risk trusting:

> Remembering my first school experience brings back into sharp focus the pain of a shy first grade child who was terrified of making an error on the oatmeal-colored, blue-lined first grade writing paper...afraid because the fat, red first grade pencil had no eraser! If you were blessed by having a treasured pink pearl eraser, and if you <u>did</u> dare use it, you risked tearing a gaping hole in your blue-lined paper, the only one you were given for the assignment. The hole was a graphic witness to your imperfection!
>
> Margie Greene

Our prior learning experiences can wreak havoc on our ability to take intellectual risks. The curiosity and resourcefulness so naturally present in childhood can be thwarted by traditional schooling that insists on "no erasures" and "perfection"! Thus, in the world of higher education I have come to see the necessity of developing a learning atmosphere that is securely based on trust. In The Prophet, Kahlil Gibran states: "The teacher gives not of his wisdom, but of his belief and his lovingness." Our group facilitator, Dr. Kathy Scott, did just that:

> ...it's like the day of class and since
> I'm trying not to structure it [the seminar] I
> can't be sure what people are going to bring...
> So I find myself a little on edge...and once I get
> here, it's fine because I really do trust this group.

I wonder how often professors are so concerned with dispensing knowledge that they neglect to communicate warmth and trust to their students. I also wonder if the graduate student, so concerned with succeeding in the competitive student subculture, can learn to give and receive strength from others. Jess Lair, Psychologist in the College of Education at the University of Minnesota, writes:

> Trust is so powerful because it is hooked up to the
> self-fulfilling prophesy which says that what you
> expect from the world is about what you get...As I
> was thinking about trust, I realized that trust is
> really acceptance carried to an extreme... (pp 114-115)

As professors of education and students who are to become professors of education, we must cultivate the ability to translate what is, into what needs to be...to help people believe in themselves, and in what they can become...to build bridges of

trust between ourselves and others...to see lumps of carbon and imagine that when molded and polished they can shine as diamonds...to project the actualization of self-fulfilling prophesy. Upon this, a successful shared experience depends, and through this the "circle" of learning known so well by the New England transcendentalists can become a reality in today's graduate schools.

****THE ART OF TRANSPARENCY****

Having established trust as a foundation, the group began to overcome fears of non-acceptance, and to venture into areas of the intellectual unknown. A fellow student's writing excerpt reveals the openness we began to sense:

> As I was talking to Nancy and thinking about this stage I'm in, I thought of a spider. I feel like I'm ready to spin a glorious web like Charlotte, but I need to find the proper place to connect my strands. That was not so difficult! It's the time I spend spinning that has me reflecting, questioning, challenging myself...that's the difficult part. Can I reach my next connection? Where to connect? Will I be able to climb out if I go too far, or what if I don't go far enough?...
>
> Kathy Oropallo

Academic groups seeking depth and quality in a shared experience may be small or large in number. The members may be young or old, male or female. They may have a variety of personality and communicative styles, but one feature they tend to have in common is openness. They have a certain transparency, allowing others to see their intellectual strengths and weaknesses. Consider the following exchange of dialogue during one of our group seminar sessions:

Gail: You've [Dr. Scott] emancipated us, I'd say, through your indirect/direct leadership...you've given soft guidance...to us, you're doing a great deal.

Paul: That's what emancipation is all about...if as teachers we could only learn to do that when we teach--be less directive and allow students to take it...

Laurie: Also, I don't think we're losing 'narrative'...

Gail: This is narrative...

Laurie: Yeah, that's what I was just going to say. One of the things I'm messing around with right now looking at metaphor is: Is the process of self a narrative? or Is the narrative the process by which we actually experience this and what you're [Dr. Scott] doing for us each week?

And another dialogue exchange during the same session:

Kathy O: I've learned so much just by hearing Maureen and Anna. It helped me make sense of what I had read and things I'm not real clear on...

Kathy S: I begin to feel guilty because I'm learning so much! I mean, that's another role I have to let go of--that I'm supposed to be 'providing' for you...

Maureen: See, I think you've opened up the doors to scholarship...that's what's really happened...

Why, then, in many graduate school settings do students and professors so often hide behind masks? Students seem to vacillate between the impulse to reveal their fears of inadequacy and the impulse to protect themselves with a shroud of privacy. Professors seem to long both to be known and to remain hidden behind a veneer of authority.

We erect protective walls around ourselves for a number of reasons. The same graduate school culture that touts independence, self-direction, and intellectual curiosity, ironically encourages dependence and intellectual compliance because of its authoritarian social structure; a system that

tends not only to dictate what students must do, but how they must go about doing it (Rosen & Bates, 1967)! To take the step of disclosing our doubts, ideas, opinions, and questions, and then have others reject us can be devastating. The fear of disapproval, or even failure, causes graduate students to cower behind elaborate facades of detached self-assurance.

Psychologists, however, tell us that in all kinds of interpersonal situations, self-disclosure tends to attract rather than repel others. When people reveal their inadequacies, their honesty disarms those around them and pulls them into more intimate relationships (McGinnis, 1979).

Certainly, I am not advocating an openness that simply provides license for one to be argumentative. That is, in the name of "openness" I have a right to disagree with you on the spot every time my opinion does not concur with yours. Was it not Shakespeare's Henry IV who said, "The better part of valor is discretion"? Neither am I suggesting that a graduate seminar is the setting for revealing the intimate details of one's personal life. Many of us feel uncomfortable with persons who seem unable to restrain the expression of their emotions.

The overriding principle, however, still holds. The shared experience is enriched when intellectual transparency with one another is nurtured.

****THE PASSION FOR LEARNING****

Building upon a base of trust and adding validity to the

notion of academic transparency, Dr. Scott shared the following writing excerpt:

> My years of searching for an objective, rational truth were imbued with a desire for authenticity and personal meaning that I no longer want to hold in check. Finding new language, however, to express my voice is a very slow process as I crawl through layers of past experiences molded by old science and add layers of new experiences shaped by new theories...

Our group began to "crawl through layers" with Dr. Scott. We reflected on our readings in dialogue journals with a classmate. We explored the ideas of familiar and unfamiliar educational theorists. We engaged in critical discussions during class sessions, and we composed and shared our personal writings. Narrative, our topic of original exploration, became the means by which all other learning was to occur. Through narrative we found a path for pursuing scholarship.

Our pursuit is deliberately characterized as "passionate", for the quest involved more than blind acceptance of the lofty writings and complex ideologies of scholars. Recall Emerson's words in his essay on "The American Scholar":

> Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never to see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul...

Actively, we sought to learn from each other, to learn from writers of the past and present. The communal elements of trust and transparency as revealed and nurtured through narrative,

bread a passion for learning that, for many of us, was foreign to previous graduate school experiences.

> ...it's amazing to me, in myself, and I see it in others, too, that there is the desire to explore and to read. And almost the frustration that I only have time to read one-third of the book!
>
> Anna McEwan [dialogue]

Like a siren's call, the never-ending quest for learning beckoned our seminar group. Like a melody that repeats itself, it hauntingly asks us to continue searching. The elusiveness of knowledge does not daunt our journey, for in questioning and searching we forever construct and reconstruct meaning for ourselves.

Our shared experience, the risk of trust and the art of transparency, paved the road for our troupe to collectively pursue learning. However paradoxical it may seem, our individual paths to narrative became a communal road to personal meaning, enrichment, and scholarship. A writing excerpt from a group member aptly summarizes this graduate seminar experience:

> I discovered on this highway portion that narrative is not just fable, myth, parable or such. It is self and others in reflection, dialogue, discourse, ever discovering past, present, future, in time and space.
>
> Maureen Robinson

****THE CHALLENGE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION****

Imagine what would happen in your college of education if you could regularly assemble a group of graduate students and a

professor who were not afraid to reveal what they did not know, who were not afraid to try out their ideas on each other, and who were committed to a goal of lifelong learning. Unlike educational movements which rise and fall with crisis calls for reform, such an amassing of energy could liberate and motivate individuals and the educational community at large like no explosive idea before it! Within our graduate schools, the resulting imaginative implosion could then forge a path to the scholarship that is so demanded from without, but only possible through the cultivation of hope and desire within.

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